

PORTER'S SHOP—

At the heart of a rural community

BY GILLIAN FERRIS.

The village of Jerrettspass grew up at one of the few crossing points over the great swamp which, in former times, occupied the floor of the valley which runs from Lough Neagh to Carlingford Lough. Experts tell us that as the great ice sheets, which once covered most of Northern Europe, melted and retreated northwards, the melt-water caused by the thaw, flowed south. This torrent, which flowed south for tens of thousands of years, carved out the valley and led, in time, to the valley floor becoming an impassable water-logged swamp. Crossing this swamp was dangerous and the few places where it could be crossed in relative safety, became, in times of unrest, of considerable strategic importance. The settlement we know today as 'Jerrettspass' - known at various times in the past as 'Lamb's Pass', 'Tuscan's Pass' or 'Gerrard's Pass' - grew up at one such crossing-place.

In the late 1700s there was much unrest in Ulster, particularly among the Presbyterian community, which led, eventually, to the 1798 rebellion. There is a local tradition that as part of this unrest, a number of local people formed themselves into a group known as 'Defenders of The Pass'. At some point they confronted, or were confronted by, a party of Armagh Militia under the command of an officer called 'Tuscan' or 'Tuskin'. The locals were poorly equipped, while Tuscan had mounted yeomanry and Welsh Guards under his command. In the unequal struggle that ensued, the locals were defeated, their leader captured, tried and executed. Thereafter the area was known as 'Tuscan's Pass', no doubt much to the annoyance of the locals.

In the early 1800s in quieter times a Post Office was established and the name was changed to 'Gerrard's Pass' after the Post Master of that name. The Post Office was in the Session House beside the Presbyterian Church. In time the name was changed to Jeritzpass and then Jerrettspass as we know it today.

In 1851 the Post Office moved to Porter's Shop, at that time, a public house and general store. However, when a law was passed stating that a Post Office should not be housed under the same roof as a public house, the pub was moved to a house across the road.

These two houses are very old and when renovations were carried out in the 1970s by my uncle, George Porter, a stone dated 1823 was found in the wall. This

led us to believe that the rooms at the back of the house were added on then. Again when we renovated in 2014 we found the original Post Office counter and grille in the wall of the sitting-room, which would originally have been the pub.

Between 1851 and 1853 the Postmaster was John Lester; 1853 -1854 it was Benjamin Boynham followed by Thomas Kirwin until 1859. There is no record between 1859 and the late 1880s when George Porter, a brother of my Grandfather, became Postmaster.

The Porter family originated from Hillhall outside Lisburn, a townland called Tullnacross, where they still live today. My great-grandfather's headstone in Lambeg graveyard was 'erected by John Porter of Jerrettspass.'

James Porter was the first brother to arrive here in the late 1880s when he married Sarah-Jane Gordon. They ran the pub and shop and had five children. One of their daughters, Ida Porter, married local man, David Sterritt.

James was followed by his brother George who married another local girl Sarah Irwin. George was the Postmaster and they ran the general store and drapery store. This was in the building which housed the Post Office till its closure in 2009.

George and Sarah had one daughter, Mary-Alice (May). George died in 1905 and Sarah took over as Postmistress. In 1907 Sarah married again, this time to Henry Reside and they ran the Post Office and shop

until around 1926 when they bought Kilbodagh House and moved there.

My grandfather Thomas Porter married my grandmother Margaret Annett from Ballyvea outside Killeel in 1910.



Margaret Annett, later Porter



Thomas Porter in the middle, my mother in front of him, Aunt Netta on the left and George front right.

In 1915 when his brother James died, Thomas bought the pub, shop and land and they came to live in Jerrettspass.

They had three children – Netta, George and Mabel, my mother.



Porter's Shop across the street

Jerrettspass was the focal point of the local rural community. It was a busy little village then, with two shops, a Post Office, public house, coach-builder's, blacksmith's forge, a cobbler's, a church and a school. People didn't travel very far in those days and bought all their provisions in the local shops. Also the workers came to the shop from Goraghowood Station and the quarry.

The granite stone was quarried at Goraghowood and used in the upkeep of railway lines and bridges throughout the north of Ireland. Peter Murtagh often told that when he was working at the quarry he was offered the job of putting the fuses into the explosives, but he declined. A week later the man who took the job was killed when a faulty detonator went off. Peter always said, "*Wasn't I a lucky man!*"

The Newry Canal also brought people into the village, with coal coming up the canal on lighters or barges. The coal was taken over to my grandfather's yard behind the pub by pony and trap. There it was weighed, bagged and sold for one shilling a bag. The bags were made from jute and held ten stone weight, unlike the light poly bags with eight stone that were to follow. The lighter-men would call into the pub to buy a tot of whiskey and a plug of tobacco for sixpence.

In 1924 my grandfather got an invitation to the opening of the Coalisland Collieries, to be opened by Sir James Craig, then Prime Minister. There was great excitement and my mother told me they were allowed to stay up late to hear all about it.

She talked of a very happy childhood, and always talked very fondly of Mary O'Hare (Campbell) and Lena Whiteside (Wright) who looked after them as children.



The Porter home in the 1920s - the pub on the left, the house door and the door to the pub on the right. Thomas Porter is on the left and his wife Margaret next from left. The car belonged to George Annett from Newcastle, Margaret's brother.

John Campbell remembers his mother saying to George
"Many's the time I dandled you on my knee."

Cissie and Mabel Murtagh also worked in the shop, and years later when I left Cissie her groceries, she always talked about the good days working in Porter's.

There was a large family of the Murtaghs and I think they all lived into their nineties and some over a hundred. When somebody asked Cissie one day about their longevity she said it was due to the raw onions. *"Ate plenty of raw onions,"* – and I can well believe her.

My mother told me that, as children, they were not allowed into the pub, but one day someone came out of the pub and gave George, who was only eight or nine, a cigarette. My

grandfather caught him, put him across his knee and gave him a good hiding. Needless to say he never smoked again.



Goragwood Quarry after a blast.

The public house was in the Bessbrook policing district, and the Post Office across the street was in the Poyntzpass policing district, the dividing line between the districts being the river which ran down the edge of the Pass street. If a fight broke out outside the pub, it usually ended up across the road, so both police forces had to be called.

The public house closed when my grandfather bought the shop and Post Office from the Resides when they moved to Kilbodagh. He sold the pub to his late brother James's widow and she moved back to Jerrettspass with her family. She sold the licence of the pub to the church, and I think their shop must also have closed at this time.

My grandmother took over as Postmistress, my grandfather working in the shop and farming.

Eileen Moorehead told me that grandmother was a very hard-working and industrious woman. She also did catering for local events. Every summer she held a garden party for all the local community with tea and games for all the children. By all accounts it was eagerly anticipated and greatly enjoyed by all.

They worked hard and the business was doing well. Then in 1934 my grandfather, who suffered from diabetes, took ill and died. George, who was at school in Dundalk, had to come home to help with the shop. Four years later, in 1938, my grandmother passed away. Aunt Netta was working in the shop and she took over as Postmistress. My mother, who was also at school in Dundalk, had to come home to help, though she was very reluctant as she loved school.

The Post Office was a 'mails office' then, with several postmen working. They worked long hours in all weathers. They were up early to meet the train at Goraghwood with the mail, bring it back to the Post Office to be sorted and then delivered round the different areas. Jerrettspass covered a wide postal-area. Bob Wilson delivered to the Fourmile and over to Donaghmore on a bicycle; Ned McDowell delivered to Lissummon, Leish and across to Drummond; Tommy Forsyth delivered around Glen and Barr, and his brother Willie helped out on occasions. They were great characters by all accounts and lived in what was referred to as 'the Pass Street'.

There were four houses in 'the Pass Street'. Willie lived in the first one; Trainors and later James and Jane O'Hare lived in the second one; Tommy Forsyth in the third and the Shevlin family lived in the top house. The top house was a railway house, built by the railway company for their workers.



At the top of the Pass Street, the railway viaduct with the old school beyond.

Tommy Forsyth was a man very set in his ways and, when he came back from his rounds, he always parked his bicycle against the pillar. If another bicycle was parked there he would lift it and throw it across the road. One very wet day he came back and said to Ernie Parker, "I'm fed up. I'm going to go to the canal and throw myself in." Says Parker, "Sure I'll give you a hand. When do you want to do it?" "Ach I'll do it tomorrow," says Tommy. Next day Parker says, "Well, are you ready for the canal?" "Sure it's too wet today!" answers Tommy.



Three Postmen – Tommy and Willie Forsythe (3rd unknown)

Stuart Donaldson was another postman and he lived in the cottage below the church hall. Also relief postmen were Chris Ramsey, Eddie McGeeney and Tommy McNulty. When Tommy left school his first job was delivering the post.

The postmen had to be back each day for 4.00 p.m. to take the outgoing post to Goraghwood to catch the train to Newry sorting office. Not only letters but parcels had to be delivered, so it wasn't an easy job in those days.

The 'mails office' in Jerrettspass closed in the late forties or early fifties and the mail was delivered from Newry by van. I remember in the sixties Davy Cairns coming up from Poyntzpass at 4.00 p.m. each day to collect mail, always a rush to get mail ready for the postman. Some things never change!

George told me about having to cycle all over the country, in rain, hail or snow, from Donaghmore to Tullyhappy with telegrams. Good news and bad news he delivered and sometimes had to wait for a reply. There were a lot of telegrams and money-grams to the priests in Dromantine from their families. Also men working away from home sent money to their families at the weekend. Someone had to be on call at all times to answer the phone for telegrams.

From what I can gather there were also plenty of friends and family roped into delivering the telegrams, even the girls, whether they liked it or not.

The old pitch-pine phonebox was there from the 1920s and is still there today. The phone box across the road also had to be kept in good order. The sub-postmaster had to collect the money from it and keep it clean. People used it in those days; now it is still there but very rarely used.



Ernie Parker, Babs Sands, Fred Morton in the early 50s

My mother took over as sub-postmistress in 1948 after Aunt Netta left to look after her family.

The postmen were greatly missed when the mails office closed but there were still some characters about the Pass, Maggie Forsyth being one of them. She lived past Charlie Halliday's garage where Eddie Halliday lived. When she came over to the shop for her groceries and pension she wouldn't come in. A pole with a hook on it which was used for taking groceries down from the top shelves had to be passed out to her and she hung her basket on it with her list. The groceries were put in the basket and passed out to her again, and dear help anyone if they weren't right. Other customers thought this was hilarious.

Around this time Babs Sands came to work in the shop and Post Office.

Many times she told me about the great crack she enjoyed there. She later went to work in the General Post Office in Newry. Then Sheila Martin came to work for a while before she too, went to the GPO in Newry.

Rose Quinn (Mulholland) came to work in 1959. She wasn't there very long when my mother, who was expecting twins, took very ill and spent three months in hospital in Belfast. As my father and Uncle George were constantly up and down to the hospital, poor Rose got the pleasure of looking after me, with the help of three Jerrettspass stalwarts – Ernie Parker, Francie McNulty and Pete Cunningham, who were regularly seen pushing my pram round the shop and up the Pass street to get me to sleep – all to no avail. Everyone rallied round at that time and Doris and Joane Sterritt were constantly helping out and enjoying the crack behind the counter. Rose told me that Ernie Parker could mimic a cuckoo and when he did it one morning around Christmas, Canon Nelson said it was extraordinary to hear a cuckoo in December!



Diana Irwin, Ernie Parker, Pamela Woods, Joane Dalzell (Sterritt) and Gillian

In my mother and George's time things stayed fairly constant. Customers left their lists in, groceries were made up and collected or delivered; accounts were settled at the end of the month, well, that was the general idea! Coal and meal were also delivered and paraffin oil sold from a tank in the yard. Blackberries and rosehips were bought from customers and put into big barrels in the yard for collection. I remember gathering blackberries with the O'Hare girls, Ita, Annie and Sheena, but I never made much money. I think the going rate was 2/6 a stone.

Travellers or salesmen called each month for their orders – Cantrell and Cochrane, McVities, Batchelors and Namosa. Edmund Connell called with sweets in his van, my favourite, but Rose never allowed me any. John Liggett came from Armaghdown with butter, cheese etc. A side of bacon was collected from the factory, hung at the back of the shop on a hook to let the juices and salt run out of it before it was sliced on the bacon-slicer (or hand-slicer). Whitten's Cash and Carry also delivered groceries each month and various breadmen delivered for McCann's and Inglis bakeries.

Life then was probably harder than today but the pace was slower. Products in the shop were for the preparation of food, not the ready-meals we get today. Flour and tea were filled into paper bags; biscuits were loose and came in glass-fronted tins. The tins sat on a stand which held six tins and customers could pick their own. Tea came in tea-chests and flour in white cloth bags. The cloth bags were kept for Sadie Kinney (McNulty) who posted clothes in them to Malawi, Central Africa, where her sister was a nun.



Mary O'Hare in the blackberry barrel

All sorts of items went through the post. At Christmas time a lot of food, including turkeys and cakes were posted. Everyone helped at this time to sort mail into different bags which were then sealed with wax, date-stamped and ready for collection. I remember we had two lovely postmen, Robin and Victor, who delivered the mail and I always remember them coming in on Christmas morning for their hot toddies. I hope they didn't get one in every house! Post was delivered on Christmas Day then. How things have changed!

Rose left in the 60s to look after her family and Philomena Meehan came to work in the shop. When she went off to have her tonsils out, her sister Lily covered for her. I remember helping in the Post Office after school, rather reluctantly, for I would rather have been out on my pony or helping father with his sheep. I was allowed to sell stamps, pay out pensions from the pension book and issue a postal order. Now the pensions' book has gone, cards came in its place and everything computerized. I wonder what my mother and grandmother would make of it all.

The shop continued as normal and when my father passed away suddenly in 1972, Mum was glad of the Post Office and customers to keep her mind occupied. Good neighbours all rallied round again as they always did in Jerrettspass.

Around the time Philomena left and Mum and George carried on on their own, George spent more time around the shop as various people did the coal run - Mickey McAteer, Frank Conlon, Pete McParland, Seamus Cranny and then Dessie Dempsey.

At this stage I was married and living outside Poyntzpass, and when Kyle and Sara were young I came up to help Mum in the shop and Post Office. She enjoyed spending time with the children.



One day Mickey Marley's Roundabout arrived in Jerrettspass causing great excitement for the children

Many modes of transport were seen at Porter's over the years.

Bob Whiteside came up in the pony and trap and tied the reins to the handle of the door. Needless to say, it was a quiet pony. Ann Ferris came down on her horse and shouted the order in with the horse prancing about. You wouldn't see that at the Fiveways!

George retired in 1981 and I took over the shop. We renovated the three houses up 'the Pass Street' and moved up from Poyntzpass. Don took on the coal-run and the shop kept its regular run of customers.

Mum didn't get too long to enjoy her grandchildren living beside her as she took ill and passed away in 1983. I became Sub-Postmistress then.

Rose came back to work part-time and Janet, Cilla and Noreen Cairns helped on Saturdays and during school holidays.

Things had stayed the same in my mother and George's time but we decided to make a few changes which sometimes didn't go down well.

On the day the new fridge arrived for minerals on the top shelf, cheese on the next, then butter, margarine, sausages and bacon and no one died of food poisoning! I was told by George that it was a waste of money and electricity. Then as the coins fell through the crack in the counter into the drawer below, Gabriel O'Hare was employed to fit new formica tops. We were told that the old counter was pitch-pine and the new one would not last, but George cooled down when, over the next few days, customers said it was a great job.



George Porter and Charlie O'Hagen

Each morning at 10.15, a loud roar from the kitchen "Your coffee's ready!" as John Murphy had as usual taken a break on his walk from Bessbrook to McDowell's Crossing and back to call in and make refreshments. If I had a customer in, I would say "I'll be there in a

minute." "Forget about the customer, your coffee's getting cold" was the reply. Then Charlie O'Hagan would arrive. "Twenty extra-mild, Gillian!" as he threw the letters under the Post office hatch. "First or second class?" I shout, as he heads for the kitchen. "I don't give a damn if you send them by pigeon class!" was the reply, as he hurried in to discuss all the farming news. Then Joey Sterritt would call for his order and he was also part of the team, along with Francie McNulty, John Connolly and any other farmer who was about at that time. Doris and Jim Sterritt, when they retired, joined the crack and on a Monday when Violet Cairns came to get her groceries, she would sometimes bring freshly baked scones. Bill and Alex McCartney and John Lockhart also enjoyed the crack and many's a day the potatoes were burnt when I didn't get closed at 12.00 o'clock. George's great saying was: "Dinner or no dinner we dine at twelve!"



George Porter, Pat McCourt, Mickey John Sands

Pat McCourt called most days to see George, or Jock as he called him. "Did you go to Mrs. Canny's (Canavan's pub) last night?" was the first question. "I did" was the short reply. "Well, any drink?" "Yes, two Wee Willies and a De Kuyper gin!" was the answer. "Sure I wouldn't leave home for that!" says Pat with a laugh.

On one of those occasions when Pat, George, Don, Pamela and myself were in the kitchen, Rose was in the shop, three boys arrived looking easy money. A loud banging noise was heard from the shop. Don went in, only to return with his hands in the air. He had confronted a man with a balaclava and gun who told him to stand still, and still he stood.

When Pat and George saw this they ran for the back door, the two boys got jammed in the door, one pulling it open and the other pushing it closed. Eventually they ran up to our house and rang the police. In the meantime the boys had left with only a small amount of

money and Bernie McParland's car, but no one was hurt and it turned out that the police were sitting at Halliday's garage while all this was going on. The car was later found with balaclava and replica gun, to which Francie McNulty said *"I would have known that and would have had a big stick in behind the counter to deal with those boys."* *"But I'm not as clever as you"* Don replied, laughing.

When any machinery or tractors were stolen locally, George would usually say, *"I heard that going up the street at half-two or 4.00 in the morning."* One night the front window of the Post Office was broken and cigarettes were stolen, but the wind must have been blowing from Newry that night, for George never heard a thing!

Each evening Mickey John Sands would arrive *"Is this all you have to do?"* was the usual greeting before telling all the news from Poyntzpass.



Francie McNulty, Gillian and Don

I think the robbery was the final straw for Rose who decided life in Jerretzpass was getting too dangerous - so she retired! My sister-in-law Gillian came to work part-time then and she talks about the day Mr. Gill opened the door of his car at the far side of the road and a lorry came by and took the door with it.

George took less and less to do with the shop and concentrated on the sheep trade with Francie and then with Roy Cairns. But when the early warning system in the shop had to be listened to, he was the man. This was George's contribution to the safety of the country. He continued to take an interest in farming and the shop until his death in December 2000 which ended an era.

But as times move on, supermarkets rule the future; coal is sold in every service station; there's a cashpoint at every centre; emails have taken over from stamps and envelopes and the small shop is in decline. With the closure of the Post Office in 2009, after one hundred and fifty eight years, sadly Porter's Shop was no longer viable and it too closed its doors for the last time.

You can have all the cheap bread and milk you want when you go to the big supermarket but you will not have a back kitchen and shop full of crack, and the carpark outside, where you may perhaps once-in-a-while bump into a neighbour, will never become the wee hub of the community.

It was a privilege to be part of this way of life – one where my children were brought up to talk to everyone who came into the shop, and one where everyone was treated equally - as long as you didn't ask for credit! The days of the wee book in the drawer by the till are long gone.



BARBER SHOP

Denise Fearon
Proprietor

Tel: 07759 408 640

OPENING HOURS

Wednesday 9.30 - 5.00 Thursday 9.30 - 5.00

Friday 9.30 - 7.00 Saturday 9.00 - 4.00

13 Railway Street, Poyntzpass